

VZCZCXRO4657
PP RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHLZ
RUEHPW RUEHROV RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHAH #1374/01 3521548
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 181548Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9908
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3126
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0941
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0815
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1389
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1362
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2014
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 ASHGABAT 001374

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL
AID/W FOR EE/AA (BOB WALLIN)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: MIXED REPORTS AND CYNICISM FROM
RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a December 8 roundtable discussion with minority registered and unregistered religious groups and a December 6 roundtable with community leaders and staff from USAID civil society implementing partner Counterpart International, representatives told a delegation led by DRL Deputy Assistant Secretary Erica Barks-Ruggles that there had been some sporadic improvements in their dealings with government agencies, but that many problems remain. Participants at Counterpart's democracy roundtable acknowledged that problems with registration exist but also stressed that there have been positive changes in people's attitudes as a result of participating in community-oriented projects. Religious leaders focused on problems related to registration, finding places to worship, and access to religious literature. Their conclusion: while civil society and religious groups face difficulties operating in Turkmenistan, there remains the possibility for some activity. However, the future is unclear - all are hoping for some improvement with registration, but also realize that it may take a long time to materialize, if at all. END SUMMARY.

DEMOCRACY ROUNDTABLE: A FOCUS ON WHAT CAN BE DONE

13. (U) On December 6, DAS Barks-Ruggles and her delegation met with a mix of NGO and community leaders and staff from USAID's civil society implementing partner, Counterpart International, to discuss civil society development in Turkmenistan. In addition to Counterpart staff, attendees included community leaders from Dashoguz Province, Kaaka and Yangala villages in Ahal Province, a well-known civic activist and advanced trainer of Counterpart, and a community development consultant/trainer. The focus was on these civic activists' activities and experiences.

14. (U) One participant, representing registered NGO Keik Okara, described the group's development from an NGO working

on issues related to ethnic Turkmen refugees from Tajikistan.

Keik Okara now has a youth center and supports small and medium enterprise development through training programs. The activist said that he had received most of his training from Counterpart. In response to DAS Barks-Ruggles' question, he proudly acknowledged that he is now passing on this experience to others.

¶5. (U) A representative from NGO Bosfor, which offers legal information and services, discussed a challenge common to many NGOs -- sustainability. This is complicated by the difficulties in obtaining licenses to provide services and the consequent inability to fundraise and own property. In addition, this means that NGOs need to register individual grants in order to operate - a very time consuming process. The Bosfor representative highlighted the importance of raising awareness among the population on their rights and on international legal standards, including human rights.

¶6. (U) An activist from Dashoguz Province described her work with youth on civic education. She asserted that today's youth do not understand the rights and responsibilities of citizens and government, in part because of the elimination of social studies from the school curriculum under former President Niyazov. As a result, she suggested, more communities should focus on providing legal and social studies education for youth. The activist then stated that her group trains local youth on civic education issues after first tailoring training materials to local conditions and then preparing a cadre of trainers. Training youth on children's rights is her next priority.

¶7. (U) Two representatives from Kaaka reported that they had

ASHGABAT 00001374 002 OF 005

opened a small resource center to train local youth on business skills three years ago with support from USAID/Counterpart. Today, these youths carry out small business initiatives, including computer repair and technical support. Counterpart's support center director interjected the importance of persistence in local communities. She explained that, when they started, the Kaaka resource center's request to use the local kindergarten as a base for training met with opposition from local authorities. After numerous meetings, however, the local officials relented, and allowed the training programs to be held at the kindergarten.

¶8. (U) The director of the Union of Accountants of Turkmenistan said that, due to problems with re-registering at the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the union was unable to accept grants from international organizations, preventing it from reaching its full potential. She was excited that Turkmenistan's leading state-owned Russian-language daily newspaper, Neutrally Turkmenistan, had published just the day before an article she had authored on the importance of focusing on international standards. She said this article was the result of a month of advocacy with the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the newspaper, but added that its publication was a sign that the government takes both the subject and the Union of Accountants seriously. She noted that while civic associations should not abandon the NGO cause, they could register as commercial entities to enable continued operation. Finally, she said, recent trips to Turkmenistan's provinces had opened her eyes to the positive contributions being made by various USAID projects that have supported resource centers. She now considers these centers an asset for her future work in expanding her network of associates at the provincial level.

¶9. (SBU) Two activists from Yangala community in Ahal province spoke about the impact of a variety of U.S. government programs on their work. One activist, focused on economic activities, while his colleague concentrated on civic development. After receiving technical assistance from USAID/Winrock's Farmer-to-Farmer program, the productivity of his 50 hectares of land increased. Two trips to the United

States via USDA Cochran Fellowship program and, more recently, USAID's Community connections program on microcredit highlighted the potential benefits of microfinance to his community. Although Turkmenistan's farmers are capable, they have limited access to credit, and the activist said Turkmenistan needs a microfinance law to help stimulate its development. The other Yangala activist said that participation in USAID/Counterpart training sessions for local residents, including youth, have helped them to develop this capacity in their own community. He said residents need more Turkmen-language materials, which will help to further activate the community. The activists' good cooperation with their village's elders has been critical to the successful implementation of their programs in their village.

RELIGIOUS ROUNDTABLE: SOME IMPROVEMENT, BUT DIFFICULTIES REMAIN

¶10. (SBU) During the December 8 religious roundtable with minority religious leaders, a number of religious groups present reported the registration process as a Kafkaesque maze of constant minute grammatical revision and correction to their registration applications, stretching the registration process out from 6 months to as much as 10 years. Several also held the view that the government drags its feet more when considering applications from groups in which the majority of members are ethnic Turkmen. While many of the religious leaders reported that they had been allowed -- or told that they would be allowed -- to travel abroad for the first time, several leaders said they continued to be

ASHGABAT 00001374 003 OF 005

prevented from traveling - especially to Ukraine where several had received training earlier in their careers. Several also reported that officials from the Council on Religious Affairs and from MOJ intimidate new members and their families to try and prevent them from adding their names to formal registration applications. Many thought it a disadvantage that no minority religious adherent belonged to the Council on Religious Affairs, as that person may be able to provide much-needed advocacy and perspective. Other than registration, the biggest issues continue to be restrictions on leasing premises for regular church operations, registration of branch churches with local government authorities outside of Ashgabat, freedom to travel, and freedom to give, receive, and purchase books and literature.

¶11. (SBU) Representatives from the minority groups reported a variety of problems that continue to vex their operations. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has about 100 members, after just a few years here. It started its registration process 10 years ago. The Vatican, however, has been grappling with the Turkmen government's requirement that the head of a religious group be a Turkmen citizen -- its most significant registration problem. (COMMENT: The representative noted the issue was because he as the local head of the Church did not have Turkmen citizenship, rather than the Pope, as is commonly believed to be the problem. END COMMENT.)

¶12. (SBU) The Krishna Consciousness representative reported that problems with the government had somewhat diminished recently - though serious harassment and inability to worship openly remain problems. He suggested that visits by delegations like DRL play a significant role in improving conditions in Turkmenistan for minority religious groups. A representative from the Source of Life Evangelical Church said that his group had been registered in September 2007, but reported that he still has problems with authorities when he wants to hold church events in his home as well as with registration with local government authorities of branches in the provinces. The Light of East Church was registered in 2005 and has been struggling unsuccessfully for three years to procure registration for a branch in Dashoguz. Branch registration procedures vary from province to province and

are still unclear and unwritten, he said.

¶13. (SBU) Ilmurat Nurlyyev, the pastor of the Evangelist Church in Mary, discussed his removal from an aircraft heading for a conference in Ukraine in November 2007. Letters he subsequently wrote to the Procurator General, the national security service and the presidential apparatus yielded only one response: the procurator's letter back to him simply said that his removal from the airplane had not been confirmed. He offered the opinion that conditions will continue to be difficult and noted that government authorities discourage ethnic Turkmen from participating in church activities.

¶14. (SBU) A representative from the Baptist Church in Dashoguz noted that the church had been applying for registration since late 2005 and that they have no rights to gather and worship. While they have not received a direct refusal, they have been asked to revise and correct grammatical mistakes numerous times. He noted that "we have been refused over a comma." They also have experienced the prosecutor's office. He remarked that every time the church applies, officials put pressure on the members and their relatives not to sign the registration forms. He concluded by stating that there is a general unwillingness at the MOJ to speak to his group about these issues.

¶15. (SBU) A representative from the Light of Life Church noted that they also have been told to revise their

ASHGABAT 00001374 004 OF 005

application several times for grammatical reasons. He noted many continuing issues including, harassment of members who sign registration papers, problems obtaining literature, and restrictions on external freedom of movement. A representative from the International Church of Christ, which has been registered for three years, noted that while the church can proceed with worship, they face difficulties leasing or buying premises for their services - something that has not changed under the new president. The Evangelical Baptist church noted that the authorities asked them to register in 2005, and after registration they faced fewer problems with outside pressure on their worship. He stated that the large amounts of required accounting and budgeting documentation has, however, increased greatly and this constrained their activities. He remarked on the trouble faced by the church branches because the authorities would not recognize them. He also noted authorities came to monitor and question the worshippers and occasionally brought church members in for questioning. He commented on the problems of entry to Turkmenistan for visiting religious scholars and teachers as well as the inability to obtain religious literature.

¶16. (SBU) A representative from Greater Grace Church in Ashgabat (a relatively large church, with about 100 members that just celebrated its twelfth anniversary) indicated that, although the church is registered and is a well-known quantity in Ashgabat, it is still prohibited from leasing larger premises in the center of the city. He noted that they are normally allowed to function, but generally encounter problems if they ask the government for assistance. Their proposals for activities are frequently denied by authorities, who compare them with Islamic practices and state "we do not do this in Islam so why would you?" He too thought it was important to have minority representation would in the government, including the Council on Religious Affairs. A representative from the Baha'i Faith noted that they had similar difficulties, but also had problems with private ownership. Before registration they were allowed to own the house where they worshipped. However, afterwards they received a verbal notice from the MOJ that all premises belonged to the government. They are registered in Ashgabat. However, provincial branches only have verbal recognition and every time they meet to worship they are questioned by local authorities. A call to the MOJ is necessary each time

to resolve the issue.

¶17. (SBU) A representative from the (unregistered) Jehovah's Witness congregation in Turkmenistan stated that the group's 1,500 members around the country would face difficult conditions that exist here even if the group were to register. He noted that none of the groups should have to register, freedom of worship and belief means that no government can prevent people of faith from practicing. In a radical departure from earlier conversations, however, he indicated that Jehovah's Witness leaders had decided in any case to apply for registration in January. (COMMENT: Previously, Jehovah's Witness leaders have stated that they have no interest in fighting for registration when it seemed clear there was no benefit to it. Indeed, the representative had reported that security officials told him they would never allow the group to register because "it was too big and well-organized." U.S.-based Jehovah's Witness leaders, who have largely directed this decision, seem to have had a change of heart. END COMMENT)

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although religious and NGO groups continue to face numerous difficulties in Turkmenistan, there nonetheless remains some room for groups -- whether based around civic activism or belief -- to exist and even expand, if leaders have enough determination and as long as the groups' activities do not directly challenge the government.

ASHGABAT 00001374 005 OF 005

In the case of NGO groups, while NGO registration remains a key metric for civil society development in Turkmenistan, it is increasingly difficult to rely upon subjective measures of "independent" organizations. The community activists' comments suggest positive changes in people's attitudes as a result of participating in community-oriented projects and indicate that a focus on a broader definition of civil society can achieve real progress in civic and community activism in Turkmenistan. Ensuring that groups have the resources necessary and are able to operate safely will continue to pose hurdles to our assistance efforts. Minority religious groups face a higher hurdle. Registration means a different form of bureaucratic harassment and paperwork, but an end to physical and direct harassment. All indicated that they can meet and function, albeit still in only a limited way. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND